Exploring the Allegory of the Cave in the Platonic and Quranic Narratives - The Cave/Reverse-Cave Allegory

Truth - it sure is a powerful word, carrying a lot of baggage with it. Yet, we may ask ourselves - do we honestly seek it? We may be content living with the lies that we have been brought up with - adhering to various systems and schools of thought, that have been set in place for us. However, how are we to break free from these illusions? And what if we sought to break the mental shackles that intellectually enslave us?

This brings us to an Allegory that has often been used to describe such a “breaking free”, so to speak - that is, the Allegory of the Cave. We shall explore two Narratives in which this Allegory is employed: The Platonic and The Quranic.

The Platonic Narrative - The Cave as a symbol of illusion and falsehood:

We shall explore the Allegory of the Cave, as expressed by the famous ancient Greek Philosopher.

The Cave Allegory of Plato, as narrated by Socrates, describes some men, who are chained in a cave. Behind them, on an elevated point they can't see due to being chained, is a source of light (namely, fire). Shadows are cast on the wall of the Cave in front of the enchained man, by having images placed in front of the fire. For all their lives, the men only know of the shadows. To them, the world merely consists of these shadows and their movements. This reflects how we are often intellectually bound and stalled by the false systems we adhere to.

Now, let's say one of them was to be released from his chains, and then managed to climb his way out of the Cave. At first, when the man would gaze at the sunlight, he would be blinded by it. This reflects how at first, when man is exposed to bitter, or unrealised truths, he may be unable to bear it. Yet eventually, the man’s eyes would adjust, and then…

He would see the outside world, in all its beauty. The realisation would then come crashing down, that all that he thought he knew, till that moment, was mere falsehood and illusion. This reflects how many of us may have had our own “red pill” moments, so to speak, where all we thought we knew, or understood, or was told by society, was in fact false. We may think we perceived the truth, yet there may have been some important variables or facts, whether logical or regarding the outside, real world, which we had previously ignored.

Then suppose, that he was to return to his ex-fellow inmates, in the cave, Suppose he was to inform them of what he had found - of an outside world, of a sun which illuminated, in comparison to the relative darkness of the cave. Suppose he was to inform them of this reality, towards which they are totally ignorant. What, do you think, would be their reaction? They may mock him, ridicule him, but most importantly, they may refuse to be enlightened, refuse to let go of what they think they know - refuse to acknowledge their ignorance and learn. This may reflect how, many a time, when we are confronted with uncomfortable truth, we may ignore it, reject it, deny it - but not for any valid reason, but rather, because we are unwilling to swallow the “bitter pill” of what we wish not to know.

“Ignorance is bliss”, so they say. Yet, how many of us may willingfully remain in such bliss? What is scary to think, is not of those truths which we are not capable of knowing, but rather, those we wish not to.

The Platonic narrative thus presents the Cave as a symbol of illusion and falsehood. Yet, the Quranic narrative flips this Allegory on its head, as we shall see shortly.

The Quranic Narrative - The Cave as a symbol of refuge for truth-seekers/from the madness of the collective:

The Quran shines a completely new angle on the Cave. It flips the symbolism of the cave, as per the Platonic Narrative, on its head. We may term this as the “Reverse-Cave Allegory”, so to speak.

In chapter 18 (titled as Surah Al-Kahf/”The Chapter of the Cave”), it presents the story of a group of youths. They had come to the realisation that God was One, and opposed the Pagan Beliefs of their society. Thus, to escape the persecution of their society (by which they would have been forced to recant their beliefs), they sought refuge in a cave. There, God put them to sleep for 300 Solar Years/309 Lunar Years, and preserved them as a sign for a future society, which had become monotheists.

In this Allegory, the Quran presents the Cave as a place of refuge - a point of solitude, away from which these youths could reflect on the true nature of reality and the outside world, whilst avoiding persecution by their society.

The Profound Symbolism to be taken from this (whether or not one agrees with the Quranic Narrative), is that, at times when society is insanely dogmatic and hell-bent on adhering to certain concepts or ideas or systems, one must retreat from the collective madness of that society. As the great German Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche wrote, "In individuals, insanity is rare; but in groups, parties, nations and epochs, it is the rule". Hence, when Collective Madness, so to speak, may lead to persecution of those who seek the truth and reject the propagated falsehoods, it becomes necessary to retreat from the madness of that society, towards its outskirts, where one can adhere to that truth.

Hence, whilst Plato may have suggested that the Cave may symbolically be a place of illusion, and being disconnected from reality and the outside world, the Quran flips this on its head, by suggesting that when the outer world is filled with those who persecute those who simply seek the truth, then solitude from such a society becomes a must. Hence, the Cave acts as a Symbol - of a place of refuge from the collective madness of a society for truth-seekers.

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